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Gift of Personal Statement

By John A. McCone

to the

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Accepted

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adequate control in my opinion.

F: Is it possible for the CIA to engage in some sort of clandestine operation without the approval of either the National Security Council or the Executive Branch?

M: No, it is not--under the controls that existed during my time.

F: In other words, you do not have an independent situation in which the CIA can make its own policy?

M: At no time. The Executive Branch of the government--represented by a representative of the White House and the State Department, Defense Department, and the CIA--discussed and reviewed all operational matters.

F: If you were getting into some sort of operation, you would always coordinate with State and Defense?

M: Yes, that was always done.

F: So that you would, then, deny the charge that the CIA is another U.S. government operating abroad?

M: Certainly, as far as during my time, and I'm sure since, this is a charge that can be honestly denied.

F: You, of course, very quickly got caught up in the--well, within a year--got caught up in the Cuban missile crisis. You had the problem there of intelligence, which I judge you had some difficulty at first getting anyone to believe--that missiles were being set up in Cuba.

M: Yes. That's a long story. I was persuaded myself that there was a danger that the Soviets might be tempted to put some missiles in Cuba. The majority opinion in the intelligence community, as well as State and Defense, was that this would be so out of character with the Soviets that they would not do so. They had never placed an offensive missile outside the Soviet's own territory. They had never placed an offensive missile

in any satellite area. I pointed out that Cuba was the only piece of real estate that they had indirect control of where a missile could reach Washington or New York and not reach Moscow. So the situation was somewhat different.

Furthermore, the bulk of opinion was that what we were witnessing in the build-up in the summer of 1962 was purely defensive--the location of surface-to-air missiles such as the Egyptians are now putting along the Suez. I was not persuaded about that because Cuba, being an island, such a defensive mechanism could be destroyed momentarily by low flying airplanes that could come in under radar, and with a very few well directed rockets could destroy the very intricate radar control mechanism of a surface-to-air missile site.

I reasoned that they were putting the surface-to-air missiles in as a means of stopping our U-2 surveillance. Once they did that, then we wouldn't know what went on in the interior of Cuba, and they could safely put in some missiles. This was exactly what they planned to do. They got a little out of phase, and they didn't get their surface-to-air missile sites all operating before their offensive missiles began to arrive, and that's how we discovered it. Fortunately we did.

F: Did you have much trouble persuading the National Security Council that there were missiles there?

M: Yes, I did, for the reason that the intelligence that we had up to the point when those very dramatic photographs revealed the presence of missiles was not really solid intelligence. We had lots of reports from informers, mysterious-looking large objects would be hauled through the streets at nights, and things of this kind.

F: It was difficult to gauge--

M: Exactly how big they were. Sometimes there were delays in the transmission of this information, because sometimes the information would have to go to Mexico. Then, there were delays in getting that information through. Some of it had to find its way by way of a traveler going to Mexico and coming out. There wasn't a great deal of instant communication because of the restraints of travel and communication and so forth. So we didn't have the hard information that a constant aerial surveillance would have revealed.

It happened that during the month of September I was away until the 25th or 26th of September. I found that during my absence--I was on a wedding trip incidentally--surveillance had come to a stop. I insisted upon its resumption. Then there was a delay of a week or ten days for two reasons: One, bad weather--there was a tropical storm that swept through that made U-2 photography impossible--and secondly, a fear that if a U-2 plane operated by a civilian pilot from the CIA was shot down, it would create one kind of a problem. If operated by the military, it would be a different problem. Therefore the decision was made to transfer the surveillance responsibility over to the Air Force, and this took several days to check out the pilots and familiarize them with the equipment which was very complicated.

F: These were the same type missiles that had shot down Gary Powers over Russia?

M: That's right. And you'll recall one plane was shot down over Cuba. But in any event, these things cleared up so that a flight was flown on October 10, I believe, or some time in early October--I've forgotten the exact date. When those pictures were developed and analyzed, there were the missiles. Now in some ways, it was providential that we didn't fly

the flight the week before because they might not have been there; and then it might not have been necessary--

F: Might have relaxed.

M: We might have relaxed a little bit. So it was just the right days.

So maybe God was good to us, causing these delays, which were very aggravating at the time. In any event, once the indisputable evidence was placed before the responsible people in government--not only in the Administration but in the Congress--it was apparent that action must be taken. I must say that a very, very fine job of tactics was followed by the Kennedy Administration.

F: Was there ever very serious consideration of the quid pro quo with Russia to give up our Turkey bases if they'd take the missiles back, or was this just talk?

M: I think that was just talk.

F: Didn't get beyond that stage really.

M: Nobody ever thought the missiles in Turkey were worth anything anyway--or those in Italy either. They never should have been put there in the first place. I opposed them. I wanted them taken out a couple of years before.

F: What do you do--get a sort of mentality where once you get an installation you just feel you have to defend it?

M: I have my own personal opinion of why those were put in, and I don't think I should express them, because they're just opinions. Sometimes, you know, when you spend a few billion dollars developing something, you've got to do something with it.

F: Did Vice President Johnson take any active part in these deliberations? I know he met with the National Security Council during this missile

crisis. Or did he stay pretty much in the background?

M: In the first place, I saw to it that he was informed. I briefed him personally so that he knew what was going on. We developed our policy through an Executive Committee that President Kennedy established. That committee met practically day and night for days, as you know. Vice President Johnson appeared with that committee and on one or perhaps two occasions, expressed his views--and of course was tremendously concerned. The records of that committee, which I presume are available to you, revealed his position. But his position was a strong one.

F: There was no contention between him and other members of the committee? I'm thinking particularly of Bobby Kennedy.

M: Not that I know of, no.

F: Did you get the feeling that this blunted Castro's subversion in Latin America?

M: Unquestionably. It weakened Castro's stature throughout Latin America. Whether it blunted his subversion efforts or whether other things did, I don't know.

F: But you think it did place him in a sort of puppet role?

M: It put him in a puppet role. It had very serious consequences on him.

F: Did the fact that Mexico refused to go along with the quarantine of Cuba give you any great problems? Or did it actually open up a listening post?

M: I, personally, wasn't concerned. There were people in the Administration who were very disappointed that Mexico would not go along, but in fact there were some pluses as well as minuses. You mentioned one; it did give a listening post that proved valuable.

F: What were other pluses?

M: Well, it gave a source of transportation in and out of Cuba that permitted some people that wanted to get out to get out that otherwise could not have done so. It permitted people from third countries, who were authorized to go in, to find a convenient way to get in there. It was very important.

F: In '63 the First Secretary to the British Embassy, H. A. R. Philby, was disclosed--that is, he had been First Secretary back in '49-'51--he was disclosed as the Russian agent who had warned Burgess and McLean that they were being closed in on. I rather gather the CIA was the one who made the disclosure. Also there are rumors--which you can confirm, deny, or ignore--that you and Bobby Kennedy pretty well forced the hand of the British in making public the defection of Burgess and McLean.

M: I didn't. I know of no activity whatsoever on the part of Bobby Kennedy forcing the public--. The whole chronology of that Philby thing, and the fact that his role was uncovered and that there was a little delay in getting him out of Beirut, and during that delay he escaped behind the Iron Curtain, has been written up and is all rather blurred in my mind. Authority sources are much better sources than I am for that.

F: There were also in '63 rumors of a policy rift in Viet Nam between Ambassador Lodge and the CIA chief in Viet Nam. Can you lend credence to that, or is this again in the rumor stage?

M: There were two schools of thought throughout government with respect to the Diem Administration. There was one school of thought that Diem was a liability to the country--a liability to the goals that the United States sought. This prevailed in many sections of the White House and the State Department and in certain sections of Defense and some sections of the Agency.